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BULLETIN - 4/28/71

FBI needs fine-mesh net to snare new subversives

Baton Rouge, La. — Like everybody else, only as usual more so, the kids are troubled by reports that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is getting out of hand.

At Louisiana State University, for instance, the matter came up several times, with questions asked that demanded specific answers.

What about the FBI agent who reported on the scoutmaster who wanted to take his troops to the Soviet Union?

What about Hale Boggs' charge that his telephone is being tapped? What about the charge that J. Edgar Hoover gave Lyndon Johnson details of Martin Luther King's extra-marital life?

Spectacular rise

First, the context: in the absence of which explanations simply aren't very useful. The most important thing to bear in mind is that you do not need any policework at all when there are no lawbreakers. But as law-breaking mounts, so does the necessity for police work.

Second, the rise in lawlessness is in two general categories: conventional crime, and what one might call ideological crime. Car theft, mugging, rape, and murder, have risen spectacularly during the past ten years. This requires intensified police activity, refined methods of crime detection, and improvement in the judicial and penological systems.

The rise in subversion requires more subtle treatment. During the

thirties, forties, and fifties, subversion was mostly the organized job of the Communist Party, as agents for the Soviet Union. The FBI brilliantly penetrated the CP, and the tightly-disciplined communists were neutralized.

During the sixties, subversion proliferated: became, in a manner of speaking a free enterprise, decentralized operation, of the kind that can't be patrolled by the penetration of a single central unit. Nowadays one Bernardine Dohrn is capable of plotting to dynamite the Empire State Building with a half dozen people involved in the operation. To interfere with subversive loners requires a dragnet of very fine mesh.

How fine? I recall the uproar against J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Why hadn't Hoover got on to Lee Harvey Oswald?

A file

Mr. Hoover's answers to the Warren Commission were extremely interesting. The answer to the first question was: the FBI did indeed have a file on Lee Harvey Oswald.

Mr. Hoover's answer to the second question was that if the FBI roped in everybody who is a security risk before a President was permitted to pass through, the sequestration would involve — in a major city — several thousand people; and the American public (correctly, in Mr. Hoover's estimate) simply wouldn't stand for it.

So, in the case of, for instance, Oswald, the FBI had a dossier on him, which however was of only posthumous use — but it didn't drag him in. Nor should it have.

All data

Cases. The way one finds out about the Lee Harvey Oswalds of this world is by accumulating vast amounts of information, most of it absolutely useless.

It requires a greater imagination than I have to figure out the reason why a scoutmaster desires to take his boys to Russia.

But I am prepared to assume, in the absence of any evidence that anyone was ever persecuted on account of his having traveled, during his vacation, to Russia, that this is what omnium-gatherum means: you begin by collecting all data, almost without discrimination.

Finally, the matter of Martin Luther King. We do not know whether it is so.

But, I consider this the single most serious charge leveled against the FBI, inasmuch as Dr. King was not a government employee, and assaults on his privacy, if they do not bear remotely on the security of the nation against crime or subversion, are inexcusable.

What is the balance? It suggests that the case against the FBI is very weak: indeed, that it is mostly ideological.